

**J. B. PRIESTLEY**

*the arts  
under  
socialism*

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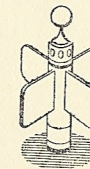


# The Arts Under Socialism

J · B · PRIESTLEY

Being a lecture  
given to the Fabian Society  
with a postscript on

WHAT THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD DO  
FOR THE ARTS HERE AND NOW



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TO HAROLD LASKI

MY DEAR LASKI,

At a time when you might excusably have begged off, and must have been suffering from some strain, you came and took the Chair for me at this lecture, and did it in your best style. I have left the lecture as it was, a piece intended for the ear and not for the eye ; but I hope some of the points it makes justify its appearance in cold print. You will see that I have added some notes—I should like to think for the benefit of some colleagues of yours. Will you please accept the lecture, the notes and my very best wishes, as a small tribute to your own unique combination of courage and wit, learning and humanity?

Yours ever,

J. B. P.

*Cover design by Brian Robb.*



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## The Arts Under Socialism

IT is always an honour to address the Fabian Society. Even I realise that, although I thoroughly dislike the business of lecturing and have almost a horror of lecture audiences, though their eyes may shine with Fabian intelligence and goodwill. I realise too, that I am specially honoured by being allowed to take part in this particular series of lectures, which worthily celebrates your long and triumphant career as a society by offering you important talks by immense Labour Party bigwigs, men of high office, prestige and influence, in whose company I cut a rather poor figure. On the other hand, the subject I have been given is practically a death trap. Politicians and editors and other experienced hands run from it—screaming. I may be wrong about your eyes shining with intelligence and goodwill; they may be glittering with sinister anticipation; but I dare not stop to make sure. However, before plunging into the middle of my subject, which is *The Artist in a Socialist State*, I must point out that from now on when I speak of art or the arts I do not mean merely the visual arts, painting and the like, but all the various arts; that when I refer to artists I mean the creators and executants in all these arts; and that when I say “the State” I am referring to the political organisation of a national society and not to the community itself, the total of all its individuals.

Let me begin by declaring firmly that, in my view, the Socialist State exists for the artists, and not the artists for the State. Naturally I do not mean that the State exists for the artists alone, although I have known artists who would be prepared to tell you so. But what I am affirming is that the creation and appreciation of the arts—or let us call all this simply art—is one of the ends towards which the Socialist State is the means. This does not imply *Art for Art's sake*. There is no such thing as Art for Art's sake; there is only pottering and playing about for pottering and playing about's sake. Real art would blow that little pigeon-hole



to smithereens in a second. But we must get our values right. The State, as distinct from the community, is a form of organisation, really a piece of machinery. The creation and the true appreciation of art are spiritual activities. It would be monstrous to suggest, though it has been done before now, that spiritual activities exist to serve a piece of machinery. So, I repeat, the State exists for the artists, and not the artists for the State.

## NATURE OF ART AND ARTISTS

The commonest mistake made about art is to assume that it is like the icing on a cake. Nearly all politicians take to this error as a duck takes to water. I am not blaming them: they have been thoroughly conditioned by their strange habits, outlook and mode of life. All of these encourage them to believe that art is like the icing on the substantial cake of ordinary sensible living, is like the bits of decoration, usually atrocious, that are added to a large public building, is like the coffee-brandy-and-cigars that round off a thundering good dinner; that the artist is the clever but vague chap you call in after the serious work of the day has been done, to help your digestion, to add a bit of fancywork that the ladies—God bless 'em—will appreciate, to pass the time in the long winter evenings. (And just imagine asking Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven and similar giants to pop in for the evening on those terms.) I need hardly add here that this has been very much the view of art and the artists preferred in capitalist societies, whose leaders are often secretly terrified of the passion and insight, the vast generosity and searching vision of the great artists. But unfortunately, many Socialists, though they may pay a lip-service to Art, think along the same lines, a fact that ought to have warned them that something was wrong. Two or three months ago, in a Tory propaganda sheet, a certain *Brutus*, whose style no longer resembled Shakespeare's but had dwindled to one uncommonly like Mr. Beverley Baxter's, rebuked me at the top of his voice for suggesting that the people of this country might forget some of their material scarcities, might work harder and more cheerfully, might get a great lift at a time when they needed it, if they were offered a far more generous dose of the arts, with all the colour, wit, insight and vision they could bring. This *Brutus* told me that all the people of this country wanted were more greyhound tracks, race meetings and football matches and the like, and never mind about art. Now, oddly

enough, I feel that this *Brutus* really understood art better than many of our Socialist friends, and that, understanding it, he did not particularly want the people to have it. And why? Because art is not really like the icing on the cake, it is far more like the yeast in the dough. It is not something added, for decoration and fancy-work, when the solid job has been done; it is much nearer the leaven, permeating and then aerating and lifting the doughy stuff of life. The true artist is not some vague fiddling chap on the edge of things: he is the man who is staring harder, seeing and remembering more, feeling more keenly, getting closer to reality, and using up more vital energy, than other men are. Compared with him, most of them are half-asleep and half-dead. His response to life is altogether quicker, wider and deeper than theirs. And when we have understood him, he has immensely enriched our lives, sharpening our eyes and ears, broadening our sympathies, quickening our imagination, and enlarging our experience. And never did men need the artist more than they do to-day.

In certain limited conditions life without art may be sound and healthy enough. Men who have a deep unconscious relation with nature, men who live simply and in the open, and perhaps face constant danger and make great use of their primitive instincts, can probably do without art, although they often turn instinctively to one of the simpler arts and show natural good taste in it. Thus the Americans in the pioneering stage, the men and women who opened the West, who knew and cared little about art, lived full and happy lives, and were mostly admirable types. But the modern American, living as most of us do, in great urban industrial communities, on an educated or semi-educated level, rejects art to his own danger. In these conditions, characteristic of modern Western man, life without art is life already turning sour. *Something* must take the place of that leaven, and that something may be acid and corrosive. The spirit, robbed of its proper nourishment, and so hungry and frustrated, may find itself at the mercy of the dark forces of the Unconscious, and may welcome perversion, violence, cruelty and death. It is significant that the peoples who gave themselves to Fascism, even in countries that had fine artistic traditions, abruptly stopped producing art of any consequence. Something had gone wrong. And it can still go wrong—elsewhere. The Socialist State, then, will do well not to undervalue and neglect its art and artists. It must try to cherish them.



Now here, as a Socialist addressing a Socialist audience, I will pay you the compliment of being perfectly frank on one point. It is this. The artist tends to be afraid of Socialism, and feels that he may be called upon to sacrifice too much for it. Do not misunderstand me. The artist in his capacity as a private citizen is more likely than not to be sympathetic towards the Left, if only because he usually has wide and generous sympathies, is free from many bourgeois prejudices, and dislikes mean, greedy, predatory types; all of which explains why at the present time the Left has far more genuine talent on its side than the Right. But the artist *qua* artist cannot help feeling suspicious and rather gloomy about a Socialist society, and this is particularly true of the more romantic artists, who feel in their heart of hearts that they too, like Titian and others, ought to live like princes. The artist wonders rather dubiously about the Socialist atmosphere of co-operation, committees and commonsense; asks himself how he will like it when splendid wealthy patrons are replaced by earnest and dreary town councillors; he is doubtful about a society that no longer has either magnificent palaces or picturesque hovels but only nice bungalows and tidy communal flats; and he is ready, secretly perhaps, to regret the dramatic values that will disappear from a society abolishing all terrific social inequalities. (Notice how Shakespeare, with all his kings and barons, clowns and shepherds, concentrated upon these inequalities, as he did too upon wildly romantic settings, to the complete neglect, in his case, of his own contemporary scene.) You will retort at once, in your sharp Fabian way, that you do not propose to relinquish the quest for social justice and to allow our society to continue looking like a dog fight, merely to flatter the romantic dreams or ease the professional tasks of artists. And the artist, nine times out of ten, will agree with you at once, but he will feel rather wistful, a trifle gloomy, not too happy about the future. He cannot help feeling that he may be called upon, in his capacity as an artist, to sacrifice too much for this Socialism. He is ready to reject the devil of commercial exploitation but cannot look forward to the deep sea of Arts Councils and committees. Do not make haste to blame him, for he has his own private demon to satisfy, his own terribly difficult tasks to perform, and must of necessity, to get the job done, be something of an individualist and an anarchist. Be patient with him, and then he will be magnificently generous with you. When I was in the Soviet Union several people told me that the actors there were the spoilt pets of

the Government. But with what a glorious result—for I never saw such acting before! And that is how it is apt to be with the artist. Offer him, and sourly too, perhaps, the barest justice, and he will give you nothing in return. Spoil him a little, and he will run to offer you the wealth of his heart and mind.

### SOME NECESSARY CONDITIONS

All this suggests that I believe that the Socialist State should try to recompense the artist for what he may feel he has lost. And indeed I do believe this, with certain modifications that I will indicate later, but first I will tell you what I think the State must do to achieve merely a sensible just relationship with its artists. To begin with, if the State wants plenty of good art, it must create favourable conditions for the artist. Thus, to take obvious examples, authors will feel frustrated unless the State produces adequate supplies of paper, encourages good publishing, printing and binding establishments, and provides its towns with excellent bookshops. The musicians will need plenty of good concert halls and opera houses and fine orchestras and well-trained instrumentalists and singers. The dramatists and actors and ballet dancers cannot function properly without numerous well-equipped playhouses and theatrical organisations on both a national and municipal scale. The painters and their like need a large and not too expensive supply of their special materials and implements, together with studios, galleries and shops for their particular art. Now all this, I realise, is elementary, the dreariest commonsense, to which no doubt you did not come here to listen, but I must point out that here and now, in this tentative sketch of a Socialist society of ours, not only are these elementary needs not being fulfilled but I for one know of no plans even aiming at their fulfilment in the future. We are by no means devoid of art here—and our recent progress in the communal arts of music, ballet, drama, has been considerable and astonishing—but I declare without hesitation, as one still bleeding from the battle, that every bit of art we manage to achieve is almost a miracle. Artists of every kind are faced with a nightmare obstacle race, and this is not simply because of the transition from a wartime to a peacetime economy and production, in a half-ruined world, for this we can all understand; but it is also because there are too many people in authority here who fail to appreciate the importance of art in a society like ours, do not realise what a lift it can give to the spirit,



and cannot understand that it may have some connection with the problems they are finding it so hard to solve. Remember that many of us have travelled recently in countries far worse off than this, and have found there that more has been done for art and the artists already than has even been dreamt of here. And so when I offer you an elementary and obvious sketch of conditions absolutely necessary to the artist, conditions that must be the responsibility of any State that has a planned economy, do not blame me and yawn in my face, for I tell you that we are not within the remotest sight of such conditions here in Britain.

On the other hand, we are still walled in with conditions of another kind that the Socialist State must promptly abolish. The artist is easily exploited, partly because his mind is not conditioned to hard bargaining, and partly too because he is apt to imagine that he is tougher and craftier in the ways of this world than he actually is. (This is one of the favourite illusions of many simple and kindly souls, of whom Arnold Bennett was a notable example). It is the duty of the Socialist State to protect its artists from exploitation as it is to protect its householders from burglary. I do not say that the State alone should do this, for I am in favour of artists of every sort forming strong professional associations and unions that will do this too. Many such associations and unions already exist, but in my view they should have more power and make more use of it, not only making sure that their members are not being exploited but also looking after their interests in every possible way. But artists are notoriously bad joiners and committee men—and some of the best of them feel compelled to walk alone—and therefore I say that the State must be ready to protect them against exploitation. On the other hand, it is to be hoped that in a socialist society the number of pirates, brigands, vampires and leeches will be severely reduced, and that expensive parasites and hangers-on to the arts will be asked to justify their existence, with strong hints given of useful work waiting to be done elsewhere. All this may seem obvious enough, but this point about exploitation is worth making, especially in view of what follows.

Though the state itself should be a generous patron of artists of many kinds, I do not believe that it should maintain its artists so long as they are able to work and to keep themselves. All that the state should do is to create the conditions most favourable for the self-maintenance of artists. I am against any proposed

system that would turn artists who are neither ill nor old into civil servants or state pensioners. It is true that many artists of considerable reputation long for security, and that this security could easily be bought by a regular state salary, with the state repaying itself by claiming whatever the work of such artists might earn. There is nothing difficult about this, and something of the kind, in more than one art, was almost achieved during the war. But in my view this security would be bought by both the artist and the public at a heavy price, and there are several good reasons for not adopting such a system. The first is, that so long as exploitation is barred the relation of patron-artist is healthy and good for both the artists and the public. The latter like to feel that by their own direct patronage they are expressing their admiration of and gratitude for the artist's work. It gives them too a certain responsibility about it. I for one do not want a society in which art is laid on like hot and cold water. If people are earning good money, then they should be ready to pay good money for what they enjoy. One day, perhaps, when a generation has grown up in a true Socialist atmosphere, the general attitude may be quite different, but as people are at present and will be in the near future, they tend to undervalue what is given away for nothing or for very little. And if they genuinely like something, they are glad to pay for it—and to feel they are helping to reward its creator. As for the artist—although there may be some exceptions to this—as a rule he enjoys this direct patron relationship with his public, cheerfully accepts the fact that his professional life is more of a gamble than most people's lives are, and would rather take his chance, especially in a society in which people have leisure and some money to spend on it, than be placed by the state on a salary list—and that is even if he agreed, as most artists would certainly not agree, that his position on that salary list was as high as his own reputation.

## CONTROL OF COPYRIGHT

But that is only the beginning. If we ask the state to maintain its artists, it will soon want to exercise two different kinds of control, both of which are bad. First, it will want to own the copyright of the artist's work, as it did in many instances during the war. (I insisted upon taking my name off a booklet I wrote about one Government Department during the war, because the text had been mutilated after it left my hands). Now it is very



important indeed that the artist should own the copyright of his own work and thus be able to exercise a thorough control over what happens to that work. I am not thinking now in terms of financial rewards at all; nor really making concessions to the artist's individualism. It is important from the public's point of view too. A work of art is a very personal and intimate creation, an expression at once elaborate and delicate of the mind of the artist, a thing that might take years to make and yet be ruined in five minutes; and this being the case, then clearly it is only wise to leave the artist more or less in charge of the destiny of his work. It is he who knows best about it, has most at stake in the matter, and therefore, if only to prevent the work from being knocked about to suit anybody's convenience, we must strengthen his control by the full force of the laws of copyright. Any other move with some public department taking charge, might easily be fatal to the work of art as a work of art. By agreeing to this, not only are we pleasing and encouraging the artists, but we the public are protecting ourselves from all manner of ruinous processes, editing, cutting, bowdlerising, and mischievous or idle tinkering. Allow me to give you a personal instance. During the last eighteen months, various plays of mine have been and are being performed all over Europe, where I have seen many of them, mostly with pleasure. But not long ago, in a city still with an Allied Commission, I found in one theatre a play of mine being performed in a mutilated shape, to suit the temporary policy of this particular theatre. Now this had happened because neither myself nor my agent had been able to negotiate directly with this theatre, because a public department was left to do the job in that city. Here the copyright, and therefore the control, was temporarily out of my hands—with a lamentable result, new in my experience. It is only fair to add that the officials concerned echoed my terrible outcries, once I pointed out to them what was happening to my play; but some mischief had already been done, and if I had not chanced to visit that city, it would have continued. And that is merely a tiny instance of what would happen on a gigantic scale if the fate of works of art was no longer the direct concern of their creators but was left in charge of public officials. Incidentally, our present law, which allows copyright to lapse after a sufficient interval, is sensible enough: by that time the work has existed so long that the way in which the artist left it is well-known, and presumably he has been rewarded sufficiently for creating it. But why these sensible rules should be applied to

literary property and not to some other—and far less personal—kinds, has always been a mystery to my simple mind.

### DANGER OF COMMITTEE ART

Then there is another kind of control that the State would soon begin to exercise if it were responsible for maintaining its artists. It would remind them that he who pays the piper calls the tune. It would begin to dictate what kind of art these State servants must produce. Why should good public money be paid out for mysterious fancy stuff that hardly anybody understands? You can hear the Questions in the House, and the "Hear, hear, hear!" greeting the apologetic Minister who promised that something was about to be done to prevent any further public funds being wasted in this fashion. A controlling authority would soon be created, and this would consist of politicians and busybodies, who would probably know nothing about art, or of elderly artistic bigwigs, academic types, who would know so much about art that any flash of original genius would set them in a rage. We should then be worse off than we have been in the past. A dull mediocrity would flourish, and the chances of great art, vital, original, inspiring, would be sadly reduced. And I hope everybody here will agree with me when I declare that we have not brought Socialism into this world in order to keep great art out of it. It is somewhere here that we part company with our Communist friends, with whom I seem to have debated this issue recently in many different parts of Europe. We jog along finely together for a good part of the way, but then suddenly arrive at a crossroads. As I hesitate, they are bewildered and saddened by my sudden revelation of unsuspected bourgeois prejudices, the lingering traces in me of decadent Liberalism, idealism, mysticism, and my astonishing ignorance of dialectical materialism, Socialist realism, and sound Communism. And I on my part point out that no central committee of any party, though its members plan and toil for the people night after night until their eyes are blood-shot, is fit to tell artists what they should do and how they should do it. The good writer, I tell them, is by reason of his imagination and insight looking further ahead than the politician and the official, and therefore should not be lingering in the rear of them, waiting for orders. Just as central committees probably do not want any real art, which they might easily find too disturbing, so too the rest of us do not want Central Committee art, including



all those huge bad pictures of the chairman decorating the secretary with the Order of the Golden Hammer. Let the committees get on with their job, and the artists with theirs. And if you tell me that I am now disposing of a very important issue—and I admit its extreme importance, and I know that it is haunting many of our minds these days—much too briefly and flippantly, I shall agree; but I hope to return to it later. What I am still arguing here is that it is dangerous for the State to maintain its artists, instead of merely doing its best, which it is there to do, to ensure the conditions that will enable the artists to proceed with their tasks and to keep themselves. For, I repeat, the price is too high.

### PROBLEM OF THE ORIGINAL GENIUS

Now, before tackling one or two difficulties, I must add a note of criticism. During the last twenty years, I have noticed, there seems to have been a good deal of confusion, which has added the minds of many critics, between the popular and mixed arts, like that of the novelist or the dramatist, and the pure and highly technical arts of the musician or the painter. I will separate them at once by declaring that I know no instance of a great novelist or dramatist who was not reasonably popular and whose work was not fairly well understood and appreciated in his own lifetime; whereas with the highly original composer or painter, who may have had to create the very tradition by which his work can be understood or appreciated, who may have demanded that the listener or spectator should unlearn one set of technical values, while learning another quite new set, there may be a sad timelag, and he may go to his grave long before he could collect an audience large enough to supply him with the bare necessities of life. And clearly it is these geniuses, often of marvellous achievement and influence, who present us with our hardest problems. For example, some years ago I read a book on politics and culture by an extreme Left Winger, enthusiastic but rather slapdash; and among the examples he gave of fine original geniuses who suffered under stupid capitalism was Cezanne. Now we have no time to-night for art criticism, so let us all agree, as I most certainly do, that Cezanne was a great painter—and also a most powerful influence—who was not appreciated during his lifetime. Probably the smallest of his sketches would now fetch more than the sum total he made out of his pictures while he lived. But unfortunately

our friend, the extreme Left Winger, in his cultural attack upon capitalism, could hardly have found a worse example to support him than Cezanne. For what was it that enabled this strange solitary genius to conduct his experiments, year after year, with solids and spaces, planes and light, in pictures of apples and tables and walls and trees that nobody wanted? It was, I am sorry to say, the capitalist system, which gave him a private income sufficient for his needs. Now our friend, in his admirable enthusiasm, no doubt imagined that Socialism or Communism would have abolished this small private income, but on the other hand would either have found him generous patrons by the hundred or given him a handsome State allowance. But would it? Where would the patrons have come from, when we know it took years for people to understand what he was up to? And what Central Committee, Art Authority or Painters' Union would be willing to grant a good allowance to this morose eccentric with his repulsive daubs? He would probably be told to make himself useful and to stop thinking he was a painter—to try for a job at the gasworks. And I assure you I am not exaggerating, having no desire to make my present task any harder. No, Cezanne and his kind, the original geniuses who develop slowly and cannot be widely appreciated for years and years, offer us a nettle (which is no bad symbol of them) that we shall have to grasp. They are not the sort of mild men who can work in a bank all week (Gauguin tried that) and then do a nice bit of painting on Saturday afternoon and Sunday. These are not men with a hobby but with a solemn vocation, a blazing mission. Now, bring on your Socialist State, which, we will say, takes from one of them his private income, another of them his one wealthy eccentric patron, and the other the sinecure he was lucky enough to obtain, and where are they? And how do they live while nobody wants what they are doing? And if we reply that we don't know and have more important things to bother about, then we may be busy creating a society that has said goodbye to any further great achievements and developments in these arts, that may smother its dreary citizens in a mush of mediocrity, that can produce and cherish everything but the beacon blaze of genius, that is losing the heaven from the bread.

Tricky, isn't it? Obviously we cannot afford, in the new society, to allow people to have private incomes or sinecures right and left in the hope that one of them may turn out to be another Cezanne. But here I would add this, in parenthesis. There are



—and certainly will be—a large number of pleasant half-jobs, not demanding too much time and energy but requiring men and women of culture, not too responsible positions in libraries, galleries, museums, opera houses, theatres and the like, that seem to me particularly suitable for certain types of artists—not the big volcanic fellows who would blow the place up in a week—but the milder and more modest kinds, the occasional poets or musicians, the dramatist, novelist, essayist or critic who is more fastidious than fertile, the painter who works best at intervals; and I believe by bearing this in mind, we may neatly solve two little problems at the same time, filling not unimportant if small positions with the right kind of people, and offering opportunity and security to those minor artists who prefer to have some pleasant regular employment outside their art. But now let us grasp the nettle again. Our Socialist State, with no private incomes, eccentric rich patrons or sinecures, we will say, is here; and here too is young Smith, that gawky, rather sullen young man, who is obviously no fool but whose strange pictures or queer sonatas nobody likes. What is to become of him?

#### CASE OF YOUNG SMITH

Do not let us delude ourselves. Good taste and judgment in these matters of fine art will not be miraculously bestowed upon the leaders of collectivist society. When young Smith turns up, producing his rum paintings or his almost sinister sonatas, it is probably fifty to one that the Committee, probably consisting of educationalists, officials and a few tired old frauds of artists, will promptly turn young Smith down. No scholarship, no grant, no public subsidy, for this young man, who is doing things that nobody wants, will not take good advice, and appears to be not only obstinate and bad-mannered but also not quite right in his head. "Go earn your living, young man," they will say to him, "and if you must go on painting, then do it in your spare time, and take our course of evening classes to improve yourself. Miss Robinson will give you a copy of the Handbook." And young Smith, who is, please remember, a genuine original genius, one of those rare creatures who seem to arrive here from some other and fierier planet, will certainly reject this well-meant but idiotic advice, and go storming out, to paint or compose day and night even if it means starvation. For this strange young man will be in the grip of profound forces quite beyond the comprehension

of any useful member of a Grants Committee. And he cannot—and indeed it is essential that he must not—be tamed. On the other hand, if he starves, if he is humbugged and bullied by officials and psychiatrists, if he feels himself terribly isolated and at war with the community, his precious gifts, the rarest of all, may be lost to us.

It is no use saying: "Oh well, we'll see that all these brilliant young artists are helped at first. Even if we don't understand what they're trying to do, we'll still help 'em." If you take that line, then any chap with a bit of impudence can pop in, claiming to be an original genius, and live without working, supported by public funds. Lazy frauds by the score would turn up, finally discrediting all attempts to subsidise the artist in the early stage of his career. No, there is no easy way out there. Indeed, probably there is no easy way out for any genuine young Smith either. No matter how we plan, he may have to risk some bad years, although of course it is characteristic of the artist of real originality and power that he is always ready to take that risk. He cannot do anything else, cannot compromise, because his work is his life, and unless he is attempting to produce that work he feels that he is not living at all and might as well be dead. Now I think I have faced this problem honestly, and it is one that is generally shirked. I am entitled now, I feel, to indulge in a little optimism. In the first place, I take the view that when people have more leisure and have increased opportunities to study the arts, an original genius, making considerable demands on his audience's understanding of technique, will have a chance of being appreciated earlier in his career. I think something of this sort is already happening. Because there is a lot of rubbish about and people pack in to try to enjoy all kinds of nonsense, we are apt to imagine that there is now less knowledge and appreciation of the arts than there was—say, thirty—or fifty—or a hundred years ago. This is quite wrong. The fact is, that there is more of everything about the place—more rubbish perhaps, but also more art too. Take a look sometime at the monthly bulletin of the Arts Council, with pages and pages devoted to what is happening in each group of counties, concerts by the hundred, repertory and touring companies all up and down the country, exhibitions of pictures and drawings going off in all directions; and then remember that all this represents *new* activity; and then add to it all that has been continued from before the war; and then add again all the lectures and courses and classes of all the educational bodies; and I think



you will arrive with me at the conclusion that although our people today may not know and appreciate as much art as they ought to do, there are certainly far more of them knowing and appreciating it than ever before in our history.

### THE PEOPLE WITH A FLAIR

Now if you turn a mass of people on to the arts, this is what happens. A large number of them will discover a new source of interest and enjoyment, in a rather mild fashion, making a fairly good average audience or public for the arts. But for a certain, much smaller percentage, some particular art will come as a revelation. This is what they have been looking for all their lives. You run into such persons—often quite rough chaps, or mousy little women—at exhibitions of pictures, concerts, theatres, or browsing in good bookshops; and often they talk with enthusiasm and discrimination of work that you would have thought much too difficult for them. Education and environment have nothing to do with it, for these are people with an odd natural flair for a certain art or for a certain type of expression in that art. And as you never know where they are going to pop up, this is all the more reason why people in general should have an opportunity to experience good art, however original and difficult it may seem to be. The more people have this chance, the more of these natural understanders and appreciators we shall discover. Now when we come to our difficult fellow, young Smith, the strange original genius, who is not likely to be accepted by the local Committee, it is these folk with the odd flair who may easily save the situation. The wealthy patron will have gone, but these other people might collectively take his place in helping the young original artist through the first hard period. They cannot spend thousands, but they can spend a pound or two to back their fancy, can easily subscribe enough between them to keep a few young Smiths going until they are really widely appreciated. Not only that, but these born enthusiasts can begin to get to work on the Committees, persuading, arguing, denouncing and bullying, if necessary, until some notice is taken of young Smith and his work. And there is nothing fanciful here. The process is already at work, and I wish I was as sure of a good supply of original geniuses as I am of the certainty of this growing encouragement. Remember that a people freed from the old host of gnawing anxieties and desperate worries, and sooner or later, we hope, free too from the pressure

exerted upon them by big commercial enterprises to entangle them in trivialities (an aspect of capitalism that is too frequently overlooked), and people living in reasonably civilised conditions, will have far more mental energy to spare than they have had in the past. Their minds, as we are beginning to see already, will look for things on which to fasten, and among the arts they will find some of the most exciting of those things.

### THE ARTIST WORKS FROM INSIDE

So far as important new works of art are concerned, however, we shall be told by some pessimists that the citizens of the Socialist State will be, in the mournful phrase of the American comic song, "all dressed up and nowhere to go." In other words, we shall be told that real art and the Socialist State will find co-existence impossible. That tidy housewife, Socialism, will not take as a husband that disreputable fellow, who is probably an anarchist at heart, who keeps no regular hours, whose values are strange and disturbing, the creative artist; who, in his turn, will refuse to settle down, fill in all his forms and pay his dues, will find no inspiration in this vast hygienic beehive, and will take to drink and despair. I have said that the State must leave the artist alone with his work after creating reasonable conditions for him. There must be no meetings of politicians and bureaucrats telling painters how to paint and musicians how to compose, and no inter-departmental co-ordinating committees handing out ideas and themes from the various Ministries to novelists and dramatists. ("Your next job, old boy, is a three act comedy about bottling fruit in the Women's Institutes. Sorry, old boy, but you must—it's a definite directive from the F.A.O. through the C.O.I.") We cannot accept the view that artists are mere stooges for the Public Relations departments. An artist has to be a technician, but he has also to be something more than a technician. And if this is not recognised, then there may be plenty of bottled fruit, but there will not be much art worth having. And if you say that bottled fruit comes first, you may also find that it comes last too: in short, that art, and all the wonder and insight and glory of it, has vanished from your world, which, all properly tidy and cleaned up, is nothing but a mausoleum of the human spirit. Now when I talk like this to some people, they are deeply shocked, as if I were revealing bourgeois prejudices that they imagined I had lost long ago. "You of all people!" they cry reproachfully. And then I have to point out



that if I often prefer to work with political and social themes, it is because I have chosen those particular themes myself and have not had them imposed upon me. They happen to interest and even excite me, so I make use of them; and I wish far more of my colleagues here would make use of them. But of their own free choice, so far as there is any free choice in this matter. At any rate the compulsion must come from inside, where the real work of bringing them to life will have to be done, and not from outside. A film producer complained to me the other day that his writers were letting him down. He said he had given them several wonderful ideas for stories, which had excited him, but they were not bringing them to life. I told him that if these ideas of his had excited him so much, he ought to have written the stories, and brought them to life himself; and that he should ask his writers to work on ideas that excited *them*, for a change. And that is the trouble about the artist, you see. He cannot make it exciting for you until he has first made it exciting for himself. And no C.S.C.A.S., which the Central Steering Committee for Art Stimulation would soon be called, even though it be staffed by administrative types on a high level, can go down and light fires in the artist's unconscious mind.

Nevertheless, it does not follow then that there will be a complete divorce between the policies and aims of the State, the various political and economic and social adventures of the community, and the outlook and work of the artists. In the present quarrel, which certain decisions recently taken in Russia have emphasized, I believe both parties to be in the right. The politician and the sociologist are entitled to say to the artist: Come and help us in our great struggle. On the other hand, the artist is right to say: Take your committees away from me, and leave me alone with my work. They are all at cross-purposes, punching at each other in a thick fog, as the nations themselves are, these days. Leave the artist alone with his work—certainly; and make no attempt, doomed to failure, at dictation. But I believe that if you make the artist feel that once again, after a long exile on the outer rim of society, he is back again in the centre, secure in the real heart of the community, which looks to him for wonder and insight and glory, then artists of all kinds will find themselves naturally tending to bring their own work into line with the broad aims and the various adventures of the community. He will do what the politician or the educator or the sociologist would like him to do, not because he has been

told to do it that way, but because he has found his inspiration at the same source. And this would be an excellent thing for many artists, who cannot help feeling obscurely that something is wrong, that the artery is hardened and narrow, that new and refreshing springs should be unsealed for them, that somehow they are cut off from the great common movements of their age. A great deal of the art of our time, in spite of its superb technical equipment, has suffered because the artist has assumed that a kind of exile from the broad community is his natural lot. Alone with his work, determined to make it as perfect as possible, he feels for the time being that he is in the centre and heart of things; but then as soon as he leaves his work, goes into the street or a pub or looks at the newspaper, he begins to feel a wistful eccentric on the edge of society, a belated Shakespearean fool singing in a high cracked voice in the storm on the heath. Thus many of these artists, men of undoubted genius, have been driven more and more, further and further, into the dark recesses of their own being, from which they have brought us only elaborately detailed reports of their own doubts and torments. This is particularly seen in what should be the popular and universally accepted art of the Novel, in which contemporary men of genius, men like Proust, Joyce, Gide, Mann, are admired by the comparative few for their great gifts and completely unread and misunderstood by the many, who can still read and enjoy Tolstoy and Balzac and Dickens. Time after time we have seen these great gifts, which should have illuminated like suns the lives of millions, narrowed to a faint radiance for a mere handful of aesthetes, just because circumstances have so compelled the writers to turn inward that they have neither realised their own full natures nor done for their art what previous men of genius did for theirs. I say then, that if the artist discovers himself near the centre again, as one of the community's essential interpreters, art itself will do what no committee or union can compel it to do.

## THE FLOWER OF ART

Great art probably depends on a balance between the outward view of man in society and the inward view of man exploring the depths of his own psyche. The artist swings, as indeed we must all do, between the extremes of the organised community and the Collective Unconscious, the vast outward world of human society and the dark mysterious ocean of that Unconscious from which



inspiration comes. Look too long in one way or the other, and the balance is lost, and the art misses greatness. But there is something else too. Great art seems to arrive for those communities that genuinely and warmly demand it. In seventy years the small single city of Florence produced more great work in the visual arts than the whole continent of America has produced in two hundred years. Why? Because the Florentines had a passion for the visual arts and the Americans have not, and once the community has a passion it is as if some queer force were generated just below the surface of its life, exploding in works of genius. If the English were as excited about poetic tragedies and string quartets as they are about Test Matches, then very soon, I am prepared to prophesy, we should bring forth the most enchanting poetic tragedies and string quartets. And indeed, sometimes when I glance at those articles, which know nothing of any paper shortage, be-moaning our recent lack of success in this field of international sport, I wonder if the editors, by still giving so much space and attention to sport and so little to the arts, are not perhaps backing the wrong horse, for it may well be that we English, who led the way in these games for so long, have really now moved away from them in the depths of our collective being, and are now ready for new and more enduring triumphs, are beginning to cry in the darkness for the colour and grace and glory of the arts. I commend the idea, sketchy though it is, to the makers of our Socialist State, who would then find the arts, both as creation and appreciation, leavening the heavy and soggy dough of our society. We might then find it possible to achieve a community in which every citizen felt himself to be something of an artist and every artist knew himself to be a citizen. But the State can only clear the ground and build a wall against the cold wind: it cannot pull out of the dark soil the flower of art; only the artist can do that. I always remember with some feeling a story my wife told me. She stayed once in France at the house of a musician who had been blind since childhood. This musician told her how he had been given an edition in braille of Beethoven's sonatas, and how, as his fingers had moved over the raised dots, the full wonder and grandeur and beauty of these compositions had burst upon him in his darkness, and he had wept. A deaf musician, hearing in imagination the passion and glory of his themes, makes some marks on paper, and then years and years afterwards these marks are changed to little lumps and scratches so that a blind man's fingers read them and from

those fingers a message goes flaming to blaze in the windowless mind, and after a century a stoical man breaks down and cries. When I remember that story, Man seems great again, and no matter how vast and mysterious this universe, his heart and mind are at home in it. No State can work miracles like these. All it can do is to cherish them.



# What The Government Should Do For The Arts Here And Now

IN my lecture I pointed out that if the State wants plenty of good art, it must create favourable conditions for the artist; and I went on to say that these conditions did not exist in this country now and that I knew of no plans to bring them into existence in the near future. I added that other governments, far worse off than ours, were already doing more for their arts and artists than our government is doing. I could have gone further than this and declared, with perfect truth, that many artists of different kinds here now find themselves much worse off than ever before and are beginning to wonder if the Labour Party cares a rap whether they live or die. The position is all the more serious because our people need all the lift that the arts can give them. There is a further danger, now just in sight. If the wrong people control the platforms on which the artist must appear, there is more than a chance that such people will exercise that control for political ends. (This is already beginning to happen in the Theatre, where plays of no great merit that satirise or attack Government policy are given particularly favourable opportunities in the West End. It will be noticed too that British films, which should be using themes that deal with broad social issues in a post-war spirit, are mostly avoiding such themes.) Not being in the confidence of our present ministers, I cannot say why they are not aware of these dangers or why they are doing so little for the arts and the artists, but if they were challenged I imagine that their reply would be something like this: "Yes, that's all very well. But look at our programme. We have too many other more important things to do. All this stuff can wait. Give us time, and we will offer you a Plan For Leisure."

This is, as I suggested in my lecture, the icing-on-the cake attitude towards art, and I believe it to be all wrong. We need the arts, and all the great lift of the spirit they can give us, urgently here and now. The dough must have its leaven; and routine pep talks from tired politicians are not, in my view, the right kind of leaven. No doubt I shall be told that most people in this country, in spite of many recent examples to the contrary,

do not care tuppence for all your arts; that the total works of Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven, to say nothing of Shaw, Augustus John, Vaughan Williams, would not raise the faintest cheer at any Trade Union meeting. To which my instant reply would be that, even if this should be true, the arts in one form or another mean a great deal to sensitive, alert and articulate people, and that these are the very people who soon sway all the rest. (Just let them swing away from the Left—and see what happens!) And that is not all. For more than half a century the various Socialist and Labour parties have been telling us that they, and they alone, care for the artist and realise the importance of art in the life of the community. Thus the pledge was made, and now the time is here when that pledge must be redeemed.

## WHY FEED EDUCATION AND STARVE THE ARTS?

The Ministry of Education or the Arts Council should call a conference, representative of all the arts, that could examine the present situation in detail and could then draw up a programme of aid to the arts, in consultation with official advisers. In my view it is absurd to plan and allot vast sums of money to gigantic educational schemes if the environment of our young people, with all its gigantic *uneducating* influences, is to be left untouched; and among the chief factors that create a good environment are proper conditions for the arts and the artists. For example, what is the use of spending hundreds of thousands of pounds every year teaching children that Shakespeare is a great dramatist, if every playhouse accessible to those children and their parents is completely controlled by men who are determined to present nothing but leg shows and stupid farces? Why have art teachers if real painters are nearly starving? Why teach music and then offer conductors and symphonic players not a glimpse of security? Why have elaborate courses, at the public expense, on English Literature, and yet allow some of the best contemporary books to be out of print for want of paper and binding? Why spend millions preparing children to enjoy a cultured leisure, and then, because we say we cannot afford anything else, turn them loose in a world of idiotic films, greyhound tracks, fun fairs, and pornographic trash? And, for that matter, why feed a British Council to spread British culture abroad, and yet go on starving that culture at home? But such questions are too easy to ask, if hard to answer. The conference on *Aid to The Arts* should be



called as soon as possible. Any person attending this conference may find the following notes of some use, but nobody realises better than I do how woefully inadequate they are. My excuse is that they have had to be written against time, and during a holiday season when it has been impossible for me to collect material from all the necessary sources or to have any discussion with various representatives of the arts. But inadequate though they are, they are better than nothing, and may at least provide a few jumping-off places for those who are interested.

## VISUAL ARTS

First, more materials and implements for artists. Paints, canvases and brushes are now almost unobtainable. I suggested at the U.N.E.S.C.O. Conference in Paris, where it was subsequently adopted as part of the 1947 programme, that U.N.E.S.C.O. should conduct an international enquiry into the manufacture and distribution of artists' materials and implements, as some countries are desperately short and other countries still have a fair supply. The British Government should acquaint itself with the result of this enquiry, and should instruct the Board of Trade or the Ministry of Supply to do everything possible to encourage the production or importation of such materials and implements. We have now some excellent schools of painting here; there is a growing interest in the visual arts; so it is high time a determined attempt was made to remedy these shortages.

Next, the grants to galleries should be extended and enlarged. Until this last year the Tate Gallery, which houses the principal collection of British Art, received no grant at all, and even now its grant is much too small. It is all very well taxing and death-dutying large fortunes out of existence, but some of the rich did buy and donate good pictures to public galleries, and the Government that has taken their money might at least fulfil some of their obligations. In the same way, the Artists' General Benevolent Institution, which helps artists in distress, should receive a decent public grant, for under present taxation private persons cannot afford to contribute generously to such funds as these. The Government cannot have it both ways, cannot tax the successful artist ferociously, banish the wealthy patron, and then expect charitable contributions and mutual help to go on as before. On the other hand, I have long felt that by the exercise of a little ingenuity and by some public co-operation, far more could be

done for painters. Thus, sellers and buyers of pictures by old masters and the like could be asked to contribute  $2\frac{1}{2}$  per cent. to a benevolent fund; and the same  $2\frac{1}{2}$  per cent. could be paid by both seller and buyer every time a picture by a living painter changed hands, the money going to the painter himself, who would then at least make something more out of the pictures he was compelled to sell for small sums early in his career.

Again, as the wealthy patron disappears, the Government, and of course other public bodies, should commission large works of art, otherwise very soon only the artist who keeps to small works will be able to exist. Here again a Government that announces that it is going to change the economic and social life of a nation must face its responsibilities. We commissioned a lot of good work during the war, through the War Artists Commission; and the same machinery could be set in motion for peace time, when there are even better subjects for the artists to be found in various aspects of our communal life.

## ART AND BUILDINGS

Finally, if the building shortage is to continue, professional artists are entitled to some special consideration, because they cannot work anywhere. If studios are scarce, then artists should be entitled to buy or rent them long before they are let to people who merely want to give parties in a large fancy room. If this means interfering with somebody's liberty, then interfere with it; for after all what may be merely a whim to some studio-hunter may be a matter of life-and-death to a painter. And here let me add—for it applies to the other arts, too—that in this important matter of controlling the use of special buildings, such as studios and concert rooms and, above all, theatres, we are now in an awful muddle and mess, just because the Government has not had the courage to be consistent. While building itself is severely controlled, existing buildings should also be controlled. By forbidding the erection of new buildings, you put an end to free enterprise and competition, and at the same time, if you do not exercise further control, you confer upon present owners a most powerful and unjust monopoly. An artist cannot build a studio, but the owner of ten studios can let them all to stockbrokers with Bohemian wives. A new group of theatre workers cannot build a playhouse in the West End, but the Oxford Group can acquire one. New concert halls cannot be put up, but existing concert



halls can be turned into cinemas or dance rooms. Just where Government control should begin in earnest, it stops. It cannot be easy to combine the worst features of capitalism and Socialism, but we seem to have achieved something like this combination at present in this matter of buildings.

## MUSIC

First, we are desperately short of good concert halls, especially large ones, for symphony concerts. I doubt if there are six really adequate concert halls in the whole country. (There is not one in Central London, although there are now more concerts in London than in any other city in the world). Nor can it be said there is no demand for them, for the post-war public is a concert-going public. Houses, hospitals, schools may have to come first, but we must have some good concert halls as soon as possible. It does not follow that the Government should build them, for most of them should be owned by municipalities, but the Government, through the various Ministries concerned, should do everything it can to assist the local authorities.

For small mixed concerts, chamber music, string ensembles, the Arts Council is doing excellent work by arranging and subsidising tours. But it will have to do far more for the symphony orchestras, the best of which should be treated as national institutions, as most of the great Continental orchestras are. We have plenty of good orchestral players, but too many of them desert the symphony orchestras to do a multitude of odd jobs that bring them in far more money. This is chiefly because these players, remembering lean years in the past and still feeling insecure, are trying to make hay while the sun shines. It is important that members of our best symphonic orchestras should feel secure and should also be conscious of their own importance and dignity. They should have a definite pension scheme. Moreover, the orchestras should have more time for rehearsal and should not be compelled to perform in public so frequently. (No symphonic orchestras abroad play so often as ours.) Finally, the British Council should make itself responsible for foreign tours of these orchestras. As things are at present, for example, the London Philharmonic presents foreign orchestras, backed by their respective governments, but when it goes abroad itself it has to stand its own losses.

The Arts Council and the British Council should together

assist British composers, especially in their early days, by ensuring that their new works are printed as soon as possible and available for wide distribution. Recordings of these works should be speeded up. The demand for new film music of high quality has recently given the British composer a far better chance of earning a living than he used to have, but elderly musicians of distinction should, if necessary, be given Civil List Pensions that really are adequate pensions and not mere pittance. This, of course, applies to other artists, too. It is high time these Civil List Pensions bore some decent relation to the cost of living. The pensions given a hundred years ago would be worth between £700 and £800 to-day, but no artist to-day receives such a pension. In this matter we are worse off than our great-grandfathers were.

## THEATRE

Here the situation is extremely bad, and immediate action is urgently necessary. The Government, through the Arts Council, spends about £65,000 on the Theatre, and most of this is spent not on raising the artistic level of theatrical production but on subsidising repertory and small touring companies. On the other hand, by way of Entertainment Tax the Government takes millions annually from the Theatre. The theatrical life of the country is disorganised and chaotic, and is now chiefly dominated by small powerful groups of theatre owners, whose monopoly cannot be challenged while new theatres cannot be built. And the tragedy of the situation is that both theatre workers and audiences are eager now for drama of a higher quality, but under present conditions, which remain unchallenged by the Government and even encouraged by it, the British people have no chance whatever of having the kind of Theatre they want. In my view, here is a clear case for Government action.

A National Theatre Authority should be created, first to examine and report on present conditions, with special reference to theatre ownership, and then to take action. This Authority should take over the theatrical duties of the Arts Council, which can deal adequately with the visual arts and music but not with the Theatre. A far larger proportion of the money collected in Entertainment Tax should be handed over to this Authority, if only to feed the goose that lays the golden eggs. Three other National Companies, similar to the Old Vic, should be formed, and each of them should have two acting companies, one in London



and the other on tour, playing real repertory. Municipalities should be encouraged and if necessary assisted to establish Civic Repertory Theatres. For the smaller towns these should be run on the group system. All playhouses should be regarded as part of the public amenities and not as anybody's private property, and their use should be controlled for the public benefit. At present there is nothing to prevent a religious sect buying up half the theatres in London, and the proprietor of fun fairs and flea circuses buying up the rest. While new theatres cannot be built, it is absurd to talk about free enterprise and supply-and-demand; therefore some form of public control is essential.

The Entertainment Tax could be used to encourage genuine theatrical enterprise and to discourage mere profiteering in long runs, which have no artistic value. Thus the tax could be smaller during the first few months of a play's run, while the costs of production have still to be paid off, and then could be increasingly stiffened as the run lengthened. With this system in operation, and with vastly increased subsidies at first for the National Companies, all productions could be required to pay the Tax, and the present difference between profit and non-profit enterprises, which works badly, could be abolished. The idea of allowing non-profit companies, producing plays of some quality, to retain the tax was well-meant, but in practice it has not worked well, and in some instances the theatre owners, whom the scheme was not intended to benefit, are the very people who have gained most out of it.

Many of the worst evils of our Theatre—the gambling and muddle and waste of commercial managements, the actor's feeling of insecurity, the playwright's feeling of helplessness, the lack of national organisation—cannot be removed by the Government, but only by the combined action of theatre workers themselves. But some of the biggest obstacles could be removed by the Government, working with municipal authorities. And the creation of a National Theatre Authority, representative of the whole dramatic profession, seems to me the first and most important move that the Government should make.

## LITERATURE

The Coalition Government did the mischief, but the Labour Government has done little to repair it. What happened during the war was that reputable publishers were put

on short rations of paper (with the result, for example, that during most of war-time every book I had written was out of print and unobtainable), but at the same time mushroom firms of publishers were able to take over quotas of paper from jobbing printers and the like, and mostly pour out floods of rubbish. Established authors, whose books were all out of print, would receive letters from these mushroom firms offering to publish anything with their names on, laundry lists, anything. Then when Western Europe was liberated, and there was a sudden enormous demand for good English books, not only had we no stocks to send out but often we could not find single copies to send to foreign translators and publishers. A few months ago, in Prague, I wanted to give a young Czech friend an English dictionary, but could not buy one in the city. So I told him I would send him one from London, but even there I had to wait several weeks. Most of Europe, including Russia, is trying to learn English, and is clamouring in vain for English textbooks, classics, contemporary literature. Yet the Government itself has never behaved as if we were short of paper. The ministries, H.M. Stationery Office and the Central Office of Information consume increasing quantities of paper and binding materials.

Book production, including that of contemporary literature, should be regarded by the Government as a necessity and not as a luxury, and be given a far higher priority. One first-class Civil Servant, preferably attached to the Board of Trade and given sufficient executive power to stand up to the Treasury, should be allotted the task of cleaning up the muddle in book publishing, co-ordinating all the problems of raw materials, machinery and labour (thus if books have to be bound, then you cannot fit an 80 per cent. paper quota into 65 per cent. binding quota), and freeing the worst of the bottlenecks. This official should be particularly aware of the present difficulties of general publishing of the more reputable kind, which deals with literature. And the Government itself should not enter this field as a favoured competitor, because that way leads to officially sponsored literature and what might soon amount to a censorship. The Government's business is to clear the ground of obstacles so that good publishers and their authors can get on with their jobs.

It has been suggested to me that bursaries should be granted to young writers of promise (though private trusts are already doing this), that authors should be more generously treated in the matter of travel allowances free of income tax, that Civil List



pensions to writers in need of them should be considerably larger (and I agree), that libraries should have better treatment; but all these are small affairs when compared with the entanglements and obstacles placed by the Government itself in the way of good, book publishing. Authors, publishers, booksellers, although they have their own particular problems and should combine to tackle some of them soon, can get on with their work without subsidies or Government help so long as there is not elaborate Government hindrance. We do not ask that we should be given villages or convalescent homes of our own, as in Russia, or a castle to stay in with our families, as in Czechoslovakia; all we ask, even if we are still to be taxed during our occasional successful years as if we were dukes, is to be given reasonable access to the reading public, here and abroad, and shown a little more consideration than moneylenders and racing tipsters. An indifference to literature, together with a determination to regard authors as comic eccentrics, has long been a characteristic of English political and official life; and no doubt a Labour Government can continue this tradition as well as others, even less useful and sensible. We ask for no laurels, even from men into whose hands we may have helped to place such laurels. But we think we have still good work to do and so beg the State not to hinder us from doing it.



